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Female Student Service Member's Experiences with Higher Education and Military Transitions

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ABSTRACT

This study explored the experiences of female student service members when transitioning between military-related and higher education responsibilities as well as their motivations for degree completion and campus resources they utilized. While the number of studies on female student service members is growing, research on this population is scarce. This study utilized a narrative qualitative approach to give female student service members a voice and platform to share their experiences and truths. Participants in this study have served at least one year in the United States Armed Forces and have completed at least one semester of college coursework. Participants were interviewed individually via Zoom, and their narratives are included. This study found that it takes female student service members longer than the average student to obtain their degree due to their military responsibilities and that female student service members have a personal drive and motivation to pursue higher education. This study also found that faculty are highly supportive and influential when female student service members navigate their transitions between higher education and military environments, and support systems such as social, military, and educational supports are highly beneficial to this population of students.

Keywords: Female Student Service Member, Transition, Support, Higher Education

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CHAPTER I

Introduction

A year after the Post 9/11 G.I. Bill was implemented, over 300,000 student service members, veterans, and their family members utilized it to fund their higher education (The White House, 2009). As of September 2019, there were a total of 786,778 National Guard and reserve members and 1,192,404 active duty members serving in the United States military (Defense Manpower Data Center, 2019). The federal government provides educational benefits to service members, veterans, and their families, and educational benefits such as the Post 9/11 GI Bill and the Yellow Ribbon Program allow this population to fund their post-secondary education pursuits (Brown & Gross, 2011). As these benefits provide access to higher education for service members, and as the number of service members and veterans are rising, colleges and universities are projected to observe an influx of this population on their campuses (Barry, Whiteman, & Wadsworth, 2014).

Student service members and veterans must transition from military life to higher education learning environments. As student service members and veteran populations increase on college and university campuses, it is integral for institutions to recognize the unique experiences and issues this population faces as well as connect and support them with appropriate resources as they make their transition (Barry, Whiteman, & Wadsworth, 2014). In particular, reservists and National Guard members are not full-time, active duty military personnel unless called for deployment, allowing them to actively pursue higher education degrees while maintaining military status (U.S.

Department of Veterans Affairs, 2015). According to Schlossberg (1984), transitions are occurrences or situations that end in change or new circumstances.

Two aspects student service members face when balancing educational and military responsibilities are transitions and retention. For reservists and National Guard members, these transitions occur between monthly weekend drills with an annual two-week training and educational settings such as university (Military Benefits, n.d.). Student service members who manage collegiate and military responsibilities face unique transitions, and it is critical to understand these in order to offer proper support and increase retention of this population in higher education.

This study centers on female student service members as their experiences are unique and lacking in current research. There are now more women serving more roles in the U.S. Armed Forces than ever before with women comprising of about 16% of service members in 2016 (Street, Vogt, & Dutra, 2009; Southwell & MacDermid Wadsworth, 2016). Experiences of female service members differ from males in areas such as family and relationships, mental health, support, and gender stereotypes in the workplace (Southwell & MacDermid Wadsworth, 2016). As women still represent a small portion of service members, research on military service members primarily consists of men's experiences.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study is to investigate how female student service members transition between military-related responsibilities and their responsibilities as students in higher education institutions. In addition, this study seeks to investigate how this population experiences degree progress and retention as well as what campus

resources student service members utilize. This study focuses on female student service members' perception of their military-related responsibilities while pursuing postsecondary education and the impact, if any, of such responsibilities on their education and transition between military and educational environments.

Research Questions

This study aims to discover how female student service members, specifically reservists and National Guard members who have military-related responsibilities while completing higher education courses, experience their transitions between military and collegiate life and how these responsibilities influence their ability to obtain a degree. The following questions were developed to understand the experiences of student service members:

1. How do military-related responsibilities influence female student service members' experience in higher education and their transitions between the two environments?
2. How do military-related responsibilities affect female student service members motivation for degree completion and retention?
3. How do military-related responsibilities affect female student service members expected date of degree completion?
4. What programs and services provided by the institution have impacted female student service members retention and progress towards graduation?

Assumptions

This study expects a relationship to exist between female student service members' military responsibilities and their transition between these responsibilities and

higher education learning environments. A relationship between these responsibilities and student service members' expected degree completion date may also exist. It is assumed that female student service members experience academic disruption due to military-related responsibilities, influencing their transitions and degree completion while pursuing a higher education degree.

Significance of the Study

Military personnel in the Reserves or National Guard are not on active duty and do not work for the military full-time, however they may be called up for deployment, disaster-related services, and other types of duty (Chartrand & Siegel, 2007). Since they are not active-duty, reservists and National Guard members have the capability to pursue postsecondary degrees at higher education institutions in a traditional manner. It is important to understand how military-related responsibilities, such as deployment, disaster response, and drill, influence female student service members' experience in higher education and their transitions between the two environments. Along with these responsibilities, it is prudent to recognize how these duties may influence the retention and degree completion of these female student service members.

Student service members are an increasing population on college campuses due to an expansion in available military educational benefits, and it is important to support this population as they transition between the two environments (Naphan & Elliot, 2015). Due to the vast distinction between military and higher education environments, student service members may have difficulty transitioning between strict and regimented military life and independent and self-determining postsecondary educational settings (Naphan & Elliot, 2015). By understanding the experiences this population faces, institutions can

learn to support student service members with specific resources and retain members of this population (Brown & Gross, 2011).

Limitations and Delimitations of the Study

Potential limitations and delimitations of the study were evaluated to understand the context of the research and possible shortcomings. Three limitations and delimitations were determined and thoroughly examined to provide perspective.

Researcher Bias. As a military dependent who has utilized federal educational benefits, the researcher conducted this research to understand the transitions reservists and National Guard members face when pursuing a post-secondary degree while juggling military responsibilities. The researcher has personally used educational benefits from The Yellow Ribbon Program, Chapter 33 (Post 9/11 GI Bill), and Chapter 35 (Survivors' and Dependent's Educational Assistance) to help fund undergraduate and graduate pursuits. The researcher's father, a member of the Army National Guard, experienced a break in enrollment due to deployment and did not continue his education upon return from deployment. The researcher's personal experiences utilizing military educational benefits and knowledge of their father's experience in higher education and subsequent deployment may lead to the potential for researcher bias.

Gender/Race. The participants in this study are limited to women who are reservists or National Guard members to give voice to women in the military. Also, all participants in this study were White. Due to this, the researcher was not able to understand the experiences of racially diverse female student service members or those impacted by intersectionality (Carastathis, 2014). In turn, the participants' experiences with transition between higher education and military environments could not be

generalized to all reservists and National Guard members who pursue a post-secondary degree while juggling military responsibilities but to White female student service members.

Location. This research was conducted at a midsize, midwestern university, and there is a limitation in generalizing the experiences of the participants to service members at various institutions across diverse states and geographic locations. With varying potentials to be called up for service across geographic locations, experiences of each individual and their interpretations were influenced by their location.

Definition of Terms

Terms coinciding with this study will be defined. Major terms throughout the study include retention, student service member, and transition. These terms are highlighted to familiarize the reader with their definitions and significance in the study.

- **retention:** Retention is the idea of students remaining at a single institution and obtaining a post-secondary degree (Tinto, 1975).
- **student service member:** Service member is "a person who is a member of the armed forces" (Service Member, n.d.). Student service members are those who are in the armed forces while also pursuing a post-secondary degree. In this study, student service member refers to National Guard members and reservists who are pursuing a higher education degree at a college or university.
- **transition:** Schlossberg (1984) defines transition as "any event or nonevent resulting in change" (p. 43). For student service members, changes include participating in monthly or yearly drill to attending college courses, being

> called up for active duty to not serving active duty and living in a regimented environment to adjusting to the independent and self-determining lifestyle of college. Alterations in relationships, routines, geography, economic status, and health lead to transitions, and understanding and adjusting to transitions is dependent on individual characteristics and interpersonal relationships (Schlossberg, 1984).

Summary

Reservists and National Guard members who pursue a higher education degree while maintaining military-related responsibilities experience unique challenges on and off campus. To aid this population in obtaining a post-secondary degree, faculty and higher education professionals must understand these circumstances and develop strategies to support student service members. The purpose of the study was to examine the challenges female student service members who are in the reserve and National Guard face. The information collected from this study will be used to recognize the unique experiences of this population and potentially aid in the development of better resources to support reservists and National Guard members in their pursuit of a higher education degree. Chapter II presents information regarding transition and retention theories as well as a brief history and current status of military educational benefits.

CHAPTER II

Review of the Literature

This study seeks to understand the relationship between female student service members, corresponding military responsibilities, and higher education course work for female reservists and National Guard members who are seeking a post-secondary degree. This chapter presents a review of the literature around the history and creation of educational military benefits, the current status of military educational benefits, and the theories and models pertaining to student service members and veterans.

History of Military Benefits for Higher Education

After the G.I. Bill originated in 1944 and post-World War II, an increasing number of military students started attending higher education institutions and comprising a significant portion of the student population (Livingston, Havice, Cawthon, & Fleming, 2011). Today, the G.I. Bill has expanded to provide educational benefits to a larger number of the military population resulting in a significant surge of student service members and veterans on campus, and student affairs professionals should analyze the specific needs of this population of students and adapt to accommodate these needs, as they do with other populations of students (Vacchi, 2012). Originally, the G.I. Bill was titled the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, and the benefits were allotted to returning veterans after World War II to delay the economic and societal repercussions of thousands of soldiers returning home from war (Rumann & Hamrick, 2009). Post-World War II, over two million veterans utilized educational military benefits, specifically the G.I. Bill, to attend higher education institutions in the 1940s and 50s (Livingston et al., 2011). The rush of veterans into higher education environments spurred positive

evolution for both student affairs personnel and veterans (Rumman & Hamrick, 2009). These enhancements include growing class sizes, hiring more faculty, providing for family housing needs, offering a more lenient admission process, accelerated degree programs, and credit for military experience (Rumman & Hamrick, 2009). Veterans in higher education environments represented a student population that has been characterized by responsibility, success, and focus (Rumann & Hamrick, 2009). In contrast to these positive outcomes, campus counseling and health centers did not have the capabilities or training to accommodate and support veterans returning from war zones (Livingston et al, 2011). As of 2015, over one million student service members and veterans have taken advantage of and used the G.I. Bill to attend a higher education institution (Kirchner, 2015).

During the Vietnam and Cold War era, veterans were often the objects of protests and discrimination on campus, and following this era, campuses observed the decline of veteran populations resulting in a decrease in services for students classified as such (Summerlot, Green, & Parker, 2009). Military educational benefits have more recently expanded to include the 1985 Montgomery G.I. Bill, Post 9/11 G.I. Bill, and other bills to accommodate and supply education to veterans, service members, and their families, and factors to determine educational benefits for these bills include, but are not limited, to the length of service and full-time or part-time military status (Rumann & Hamrick, 2009).

The Post 9/11 G.I. Bill was passed in 2008 (Vacchi, 2012), and since its enactment in 2009, well over 600,000 student service members and veterans had utilized military education benefits by 2016 (Griffin & Gilbert, 2015). As of 2017, more than $53 billion has been utilized to fund higher and technical education for over 1.4 million

military related persons (veterans, service members, spouses, and dependents) through the Post-9/11 G.I. Bill (Molina & Morse, 2017). With military educational benefits ever expanding and being modified, it is crucial to support the population of students who utilize these benefits as their experiences and required support will continue to evolve (Rumann & Hamrick, 2009).

Current Military Educational Benefits

Although there is an array of military education benefits for student service members and veterans to utilize when obtaining a post-secondary degree, there may be difficulties in accessing these benefits and understanding the benefits for which one may be eligible (Williams-Klotz & Gansemer-Topf, 2017). Students who take advantage of these benefits range from active duty and National Guard members, reservists, dependents, veterans, and spouses (Molina & Morse, 2017).

The Post-9/11 G.I. Bill, also known as Chapter 33 and based on months of benefit, is available to service members who served on active duty for at least 90 days, were awarded a Purple Heart or honorably discharged, or served at least 30 continuous days and was honorably discharged with a military-related disability, all after September 10, 2001 (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2019). The benefits that accrue under this policy can be transferred to dependent children of eligible service members and veterans. In addition, beneficiaries may receive up to 36 months' worth of educational benefits that cover tuition, books, and fees, includes a housing allowance, and may be granted funding to move from rural communities to attend a higher education institution (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2019). The Post-9/11 G.I. Bill is the most popular in recent years,

with over one million student service members and veterans using these benefits as of 2014 (Gonzalez, Miller, Buryk, & Wenger, 2015).

Other benefits student service members and veterans may be eligible for is the Montgomery G.I. Bill Active Duty (MGIB-AD) and the Montgomery G.I. Bill Selected Reserve (MGIB-SR) (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2019). As with the Post-9/11 G.I. Bill, recipients of the MGIB-AD may be granted up to 36 months of benefits if members served more than two years of active duty, were honorably discharged and qualify for one of four categories, categories that describe various deductions in military pay (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2019). In contrast, eligible service members and veterans for the MGIB-SR must have made an obligation to serve 6 years in the Selected Reserve after June 30, 1985 (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2019).

Service members of all branches may also be allocated funding, known as the tuition assistance (TA) program, to complete vocational, technical, undergraduate, and graduate coursework (Gonzalez et al., 2015). Defense Activity for Non-Traditional Education (DANTES) programs, College-Level Examination Programs (CLEP), and DANTES Subject Standardized Test (DSST) are testing and examination programs which permit college credit to be gained by active duty members who pass these college-level assessments (Gonzalez et al., 2015). These accreditation programs depend on both regional and national regulations, but most accreditation is sought in regional sectors at public and state institutions (Snyder, Wick, Skillman & Frogner, 2016).

There is a wide array of educational benefit programs accessible to student service members and veterans, but there are obstacles that may prevent one from utilizing these benefits (Williams-Klotz & Gansemer-Topf, 2017). Barriers may include access to

funding and inability to meet benefit requirements, bureaucratic processes, and delays in receiving payments (Williams-Klotz & Gansemer-Topf, 2017). Also, it can be difficult to understand and navigate military educational benefits due to the number of available services and the specific requirements of each benefit (Snyder et al., 2016). It is imperative to increase student service members' and veterans' awareness and knowledge of military educational benefits available to this population, a joint effort by the military and higher education communities (Snyder et al, 2016).

Student Service Members and Veteran's Benefits Demographics

To further understand this diverse population in terms of experience and the characteristics of student service members and veterans, it is integral to highlight the demographics of this population. In 2014, it was found that over half of student service members and veterans who utilized the G.I. Bill take at least six years to complete their chosen education program, and for those who completed bachelor's degrees, 74% completed their program in eight years (Molina & Morse, 2017). This is especially apparent in service members who are active duty and work full-time (Molina & Morse, 2017).

Molina and Morse (2017) evaluated data from the National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS) for the 2011-2012 academic year and found National Guard members attend post-secondary education for the first time at the age of 20; in comparison, the average age was 25 for veterans. The age discrepancy may be due to veterans attending college after their active duty service compared to National Guard members who simultaneously attend university and attend monthly drill (Molina & Morse, 2017). Molina and Morse (2017) also found 70% of active-duty members who

attended university in the 2011-2012 academic year were working full-time while 37% of veterans were not employed while pursuing higher educational studies. When analyzing the benefits used by student service members and veterans, more than 65% of reservists and 46% of National Guard members utilized Veteran Affairs and Department of Defense educational benefits to offset the cost of tuition, fees, and housing (Molina & Morse, 2017). Molina and Morse's (2017) study provides insight into how and when military educational benefits are utilized, a crucial aspect when considering the student service member and veteran population.

Responsibilities of Reservists and National Guard Members

With the origin of the Medical Reserve Corps in 1908, the intention of the reserve in times of emergency and national defense is to call up citizens who have trained for military service (Crossland, 1984). Today, reservists are able to engage in pursuits outside the military including family, educational certifications, and non-military related occupations until they are summoned to serve (Bauman, 2009). The National Guard serves both on a state and federal level, and as such, they can be called to serve by both federal and state authorities (Doubler & Listman, 2003). While not on active duty, or inactive, reservists and National Guard members are required to attend monthly training, known as drill, over the course of a three-day weekend and annual two-week training to meet the same physical and intellectual expectations as full-time military (Crossland, 1984). When reservists and National Guard members are called to active duty, they must step out of their civilian role and life and mobilize for deployment, leaving school, families, and jobs behind (Bauman, 2009). There is often an unpredictable period of time between notification of deployment and an actual activation and active duty start date,

leading to student service members being unsure of when they will leave and if they may be able to complete a term of school or not (Bauman, 2009).

Female Service Members

While females have historically played essential supportive roles in the military, the 1967 Women's Armed Services Integration Act lifted restrictions of women in the military that only permitted 2% of enlisted forces to be women (Southwell & MacDermid Wadsworth, 2016). During the Vietnam War, most female service members rank attainment was limited to below an O-3 paygrade which means they were unable to attain general officer positions (Street, Vogt, & Dutra, 2009 Southwell & MacDermid Wadsworth, 2016). The rise of women service members increased during the Gulf War to about 11% of armed service members (Street, et. al., 2009. In most recent data, 16% of those enlisted in the United States Armed Forces are women, and in 2016, women service members were permitted to hold positions in ground combat units (Southwell & MacDermid Wadsworth, 2016). As the number of females in the United States Armed Forces grows, the number of female veterans and service members found on college campuses increases as well (Heitzman & Somers, 2015).

While male and female service members may live through similar circumstances and events, female perceptions and the influence of these events differs from those experienced by their counterparts (Southwell & MacDermid Wadsworth, 2016). Women service members have reported higher rates of depression and PTSD symptoms after being wounded during deployment and report more cases of military sexual trauma compared to men in the military (Southwell & MacDermid Wadsworth, 2016). In addition, sexual harassment is a significant issue and stressor for women in the military

with women having reported more instances of harassment during deployment to the Middle East than men (Fox, Walker, Smith, D. King, L. King, & Vogt, 2016).

Apart from differing occurrences in the military, men and women service members have divergent family experiences as well (Southwell & MacDermid Wadsworth, 2016). During the Gulf War, female service members were associated with higher anxiety related to family and an increase in the probability of divorce, evidence that women service members had more significant conflict between the demands of military service and family obligations (Southwell & MacDermid Wadsworth, 2016). The concept of intersectionality, observing and understanding the relation between oppression, experiences, and identities, is a crucial part of feminist theory and is critical in understanding the experiences of female service members (Carastathis, 2014).

Theoretical/Conceptual Framework

It is vital to analyze how retention and the transition into higher education are unique for student service members and veterans. Vacchi (2012) explained how student service members and veterans face mischaracterizations concerning their mental and physical health and wellbeing, their transition to higher education, and inability to effectively navigate this transition. To fully understand the experiences of student service members and veterans in college and university environments, retention models and transition theories must be discussed and applied.

Retention. One influential issue for student veterans is retention. Retention, in the realm of student affairs and higher education, refers to students continuing coursework at a single institution until a degree is obtained (Tinto, 2006). Tinto (1975) originally discussed the idea of retention, and it was viewed in terms of dropout and research

surrounding the topic. He analyzed dropout as a theoretical model, with a basis in Durkheim's theory of suicide, and notes derived from the cost of higher education (Tinto, 1975). The act of suicide was related to dropouts due to the reasoning and influence behind suicide; a lack of community, sense of belonging, and integration were significant factors in one's decision to commit suicide (Tinto, 1975).

In relation to college and university environments, these reasons and influences behind suicide were applicable to the theory of dropout; low integration and interactions in higher education communities and organizations led to low commitment and a minimal sense of association to the corresponding college community (Tinto, 1975). Although Durkheim's theory of suicide does not transfer to a theory for dropout, it does provide some ideas as to why dropouts may transpire, and Tinto (1975) used the theory to subsequently develop a longitudinal model of dropout consisting of student background and characteristics, academic expectations, performance, commitments, and integration, social involvement with peers and faculty, and social integration. Through Tinto's work and analysis into student involvement, a retention model developed originating off quantitative studies of first-year majority students at four-year institutions and evolved into research of minority students and how culture, upbringing, and communities influence their higher education experience (Tinto, 2006).

In his earlier models, Tinto originally believed student retention was based off individual characteristics and drive and believed students who left collegiate environments were unsuccessful and equated them to possessing lower ability and motivation to complete coursework for a college degree (Tinto, 2006). As views shifted and research into student retention emerged, the focus altered from instilling blame on

students for their lack of retention to concentrating on environmental factors that influence students' decisions (Tinto, 2006). There are three major alterations in perception regarding retention (Tinto, 2006). First is accounting for various student demographics, backgrounds, and experiences and how these shape students' experience in higher education (Tinto, 2006).

Second, it is vital to understand how various learning environments differ in student retention (Tinto, 2006). Examples include, but are not limited to, comparing two and four-year institutions and living on or off-campus (Tinto, 2006). Finally, there are countless financial, social, and mental explanations for why students leave higher education, some in relation to institutions and some not (Tinto, 2006). Tinto noted one crucial concept in understanding retention or lack thereof: departure is not an opposite of remaining (Tinto, 2006). In essence, one cannot determine why students continue to study in a higher education environment if it is unknown why they leave. Thus, institutions will not be able to firmly determine programs and support systems that will lead to student success and retention (Tinto, 2006).

Relating to Tinto's work on retention, Bowman and Felix (2017) proposed the idea of identity centrality as it relates to retention; identity centrality is the concept of relating one's identity to self-image and self-definition. Identity centrality is stated as one's view and classification of oneself in relation to inherent characteristics; examples may include, but are not limited to, race, gender, sexuality, and medical conditions (Bowman & Felix, 2017). The concept of identity centrality is thought to have a high influence on student success and retention; students with high identity centrality are more likely to engage on campus, in class, and socially (Bowman & Felix, 2017). Students

with a significant amount of identity centrality are more committed in various aspects of college including campus organizations, academics, professional experiences, and social communities (Bowman & Felix, 2017).

Not only is retention significant for all college students, but it is also crucial for student veterans and students who are active duty personnel. This theory, in context with student service members and veterans, can be used to understand how external, institutional, and developmental factors can influence their retention in higher education (Barry, Whiteman, & Wasworth, 2014). Qualitative research conducted by Barry, Whiteman, and Wadsworth (2014) showed multiple occurrences among student service members and veterans that may have affected the quality of their experience in higher education and retention including engagement in "health-risk behaviors", minimal encouragement in social environments, and mental health related difficulties or concerns (p. 38).

Transition. Schlossberg's transition theory is vital to fully comprehending and defining student service members' and veterans' experience in higher education. Applicable to various stages of life and life changes, Schlossberg's transition theory evolved from the crisis theory, the idea that people problem-solve utilizing a consistent method, and when that method is unavailable or inapplicable, stress, anxiety and disorientation arise, upsetting the status quo (Schlossberg, 1984). The word "transition" was preferable in subsequent theory developments due to crisis' negative undertones, and transitions encompass both positive and negative changes in life (Schlossberg, 1984).

Schlossberg's transition theory is highly relevant to student service members and veterans in higher education, especially those who have experience in high-threat

environments (Rumann & Hamrick, 2009). This population of students often face difficulty with "academic re-entry, contractual and financial matters, and needs for advising and counseling assistance" (Rumann & Hamrick, 2009, p. 29). Not only do they face challenges with returning or starting coursework for a higher education degree, but many student service members also continue to have responsibilities in the military as well, including deployments, drill, and training, and they face transitions in these events (Rumann & Hamrick, 2009).

There are three major types of transitions: anticipated, unanticipated, and nonevent transitions (Schlossberg, 1984). These refer to both expected and unexpected life events, examples of which include high school graduation and a car accident respectively (Schlossberg, 2011). Nonevent transitions refer to "the expected events that fail to occur" (Schlossberg, 2011, p. 159). Alternatively, there are four ways of coping with transitions: situations, self, support, and strategies (Schlossberg, 2011).

***Situations*.** Situations refer to external factors that may affect the transition and increase stress and may include family relationships and other hardships (Schlossberg, 2011). Situations may also be voluntary or involuntary, temporary or permanent, and are in relation to one's control over the alteration and transition (Gordon & Parham, 2019). This control may expand to one's comfort level, stress, and if the situation is interpreted as positive or negative post-transition, and other variables incorporated in a situation to include the duration, timing in relation to other life events, and previous experience handling stress and transitions (Gordon & Parham, 2019; Schiavone & Gentry, 2014). Situations can and may, with regard to student service members and veterans, include

delayed benefit payments, deployments, and unclear communication with professors and faculty (Griffin & Gilbert, 2015; Brown & Gross, 2011).

Self. Self signifies one's personal endurance for coping with transitions and situations, and one's character and attitude play integral roles in this coping technique (Schlossberg, 2011). This aspect of transitions may be reduced to two self-descriptors: expectation and motivation as well as how personality plays a role in one's strengths and weaknesses when in transition (Pellegrino & Hoggan, 2015). Characteristics such as gender, personality, and socioeconomic status are included in this level of Schlossberg's theory (Schiavone & Gentry, 2014). In relation to students in higher education, transitions with respect to self include increasing motivation, competency, and identity in academics (Ryan, Carlstrom, Hughey & Harris, 2011). Features of veterans may include comparison between gender, gender expectations, branch of service, how deployment experience(s) shaped personality, and nontraditional student status (Ryan et al., 2011).

Support. The third coping mechanism is support and includes relationships, reliance, and trust with others (Schlossberg, 2011). Areas of support on college campuses for student service members and veterans include financial aid, counseling centers, disabilities offices, and faculty (DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell, 2008). For veterans, there was found to be little benefit from social support in the military in relation to mental health, but approximately 20% of Operation Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom veterans self-reported mental health concerns (Jenner, 2017; Kato, Jinkerson, Holland & Soper, 2016). As many as 46% of student service members and veterans have conveyed symptoms related to Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, and it is imperative this population receives adequate mental health support (Kato et al., 2016). As well, institutional support

and social circles, such as student organizations catered to veterans, have the potential to positively affect student service members and veterans' transition to secondary education environments (Rumann & Hamrick, 2010). The most popular support provided outside of university environments is The Department of Defense and their website outlining all educational benefits and eligibility (Brown & Gross, 2011).

Strategies. Lastly, strategies are the fourth way of coping where one may attempt to alter, gain new perspective, and reduce stress in a particular transition (Schlossberg, 2011). Overall, transitions do not fit a specific mold and are unique to every individual, but these generalizations provide structure and helps one understand the nature of transitions (Schlossberg, 2011). Strategies for student service members and veterans may include befriending other veterans and service members on campus, joining or forming a student organization, discussing experiences in comfortable and supportive atmospheres, and maintaining the self-discipline and routine taught and experienced during military service (Rumann & Hamrick, 2010).

Another coping strategy to survive the transition to collegiate life includes creating a busy schedule, but this strategy is often associated with difficulty transitioning (Rumann & Hamrick, 2010). Student service members and veterans who form rigorous academic, work, and social lives may be attempting to "catch-up" with former peers who may have already obtained degrees and are in committed relationships (Rumann & Hamrick, 2010). Positive strategies include managing stress in with healthy coping techniques, learning to control difficulties within a transition, and utilizing veteran offices on campuses to navigate collegiate administrative processes, financial aid and military benefits, and new academic and social environments (Griffin & Gilbert, 2015).

Summary

Military educational benefits originated with the original GI Bill after World War II, providing a maximum of 48 months of educational tuition benefits, and today, the Post-9/11 GI Bill allots student service members, veterans, and their spouses and dependents tuition remission and monthly living and fee stipends (Steele, Salcedo & Coley, 2010). Other military educational benefits, college credit, and technical certification programs are available to student service members and veterans as well (Gonzalez et al., 2015). Not only do those in this population have access to federal and state educational benefits, but they are also characterized by different demographics than a majority of first-time college students: on average older and working full-time (Molina & Morse, 2017).

Student veterans pose a unique and diverse population in experience, support, and involvement, and the more this population feels connected to higher education communities, the more likely they are "to be retained, graduate, and pursue further education" (Kirchner, 2015, p. 121). A pertinent theory and model relating to student service members' and veterans' experiences in higher education include Tinto's retention model and Schlossberg's transition theory (Tinto, 1975; Schlossberg, 2011). This model and theory provide a base from which higher education institutions have the capability of analyzing their student service member and veteran populations and deciphering the support and resources these populations require in order to remain in higher education and complete their degree. Chapter III presents the methodology used for this. This includes the design of the study, research site, participants, instruments, data collection, data analysis, and the treatment of the data.

CHAPTER III

Methods

This qualitative study utilized the narrative approach to understand how female student service members transition between military-related responsibilities and university environments. This research method aimed to allow this population to describe their transition and how university departments influenced their transitions. Qualitative research permits participants' self-expression and identity, self-understanding, and reduced a sense of isolation (Opsal et al., 2016).

Design of the Study

This study utilized a narrative qualitative research design. Narrative research studies an individual's story, one of everyday experience and their perception of it (Polkinghorne, 2007). The narrative research method also provides a voice for participants, emphasizes a holistic view of an individual's experience, and preserves a perspective of a specific event in life (Ollerenshaw & Creswell, 2002; Keats, 2009). As such, narrative research varies from other qualitative research methods due to the detailed description and the presentation and retelling of stories as well as an individual's past, present, and future events in context of the story (Ollerenshaw & Cerswell, 2002). This chronology of experiences distinguishes narrative research from other qualitative research methods (Cortazzi, 1994). Spector-Mersel (2011) argues stories told reveal and offer a glimpse of fundamental truths to who storytellers are and states identity is portrayed and constructed by storytelling. The researcher interviewed three female student service members with an approved set of semi-structured interview questions. Data was collected through interviews of a sample of female student service members.

Research Site

The research site is a midsized regional four-year state institution with a population of approximately 7,400 students as of the 2019-2020 academic year (Eastern Illinois University, n.d.). The graduation rate at this university is 57 % with a faculty to student ratio of fourteen to one (Eastern Illinois University, n.d.). This university was in the top 30 in Best Regional Midwest Colleges for Veterans in a ranking by U.S. News (How does…, 2020). The acceptance rate for Fall 2018 was 55%. Fifty-seven percent of the students were female and 43% were male (Eastern Illinois University, n.d.).

Participants

A purposefully selected sample of female student service members was obtained since this study focuses on how this population transitions between collegiate environments and military-related responsibilities. Due to these restrictions, participants were required to be female reservists or National Guard members and must have had at least one semester of schooling completed. The study's sample size was restricted due to the narrative nature of the research and interviews. Contact information about potential participants was obtained through the Military Student Assistance Center, and participants were contacted through email. Due to some difficulty obtaining participants of a narrow demographic, the study consisted of only three participants

Instruments

Semi-Structured Interviews. Data was obtained through semi-structured interviews consisting of demographic, experience, judgement, and knowledge questions. This type of interview allowed the researcher to ask a set of structured questions, while allowing follow up questions based upon the participant's answers and provides a more

open opportunity for participants to share their experiences. The interview questions can be found in Appendix B.

Researcher. In qualitative research, the interviewer/researcher is an instrument (Anney, 2014). The researcher was knowledgeable of subject matter after extensive reading of related literature, and the researcher's observations during an interview are invaluable. As a military dependent, the researcher conducted this research on the topic of student service members and their military-related responsibilities to understand challenges and experiences this unique population faces. By interviewing members of this population, insights into their experiences were uncovered as well as resources they utilized on campus to assist with their transition between university settings and the military.

Data Collection

The researcher contacted the Military Student Assistance Center at the university to attain contact information of student service members who were enrolled in the military while pursuing an education. An Informed Consent form (Appendix A) was provided to all participants outlining participation in the research and their rights to withdraw at any time without penalty. Once participants and consent were obtained, semi-structured interviews were conducted by electronic video conferencing. Interviews were recorded, and notes on behavioral observations and pauses in conversation were taken during the interviews.

Data Analysis

Transcriptions of the interview were performed which allows for written documentation of responses and further analysis. Data from the transcriptions were

itemized and examined for common responses. These items were then coded into categories to observe any patterns in the data. To categorize data patterns, Lieblich et al.'s (1998) four interpretive models, holistic content, holistic form, categorical content, and categorical form, were utilized. The holistic content category analyzes the data for both explicit and implicit meaning, and holistic form focuses on the creation of the story and how the structure develops throughout (Lieblich et al., 1998). Categorical content refers to sectioning the content of the story into categories determined by the researcher, and categories of style and language are determined by the researcher in categorical form (Lieblich et al., 1998). Data collected was reviewed by the thesis advisor.

Treatment of Data

The data was collected from the interviews via audio recording and written observations, and the audio recordings were transcribed after the interview. Written informed consent was obtained before the interview commenced. Any identifying data was transformed to random numeric values, and pseudonyms were utilized to maintain the anonymity and protect the privacy of the participants. The researcher and thesis advisor were the only individuals with access to the audio recordings, written notes from the interviews, and transcriptions as data was stored in a password protected account only known to the researcher and thesis advisor. Participants had the opportunity to review their transcription for accuracy prior to analysis by the researcher. In accordance with IRB procedure and regulations, the data from this research was destroyed three years after completion of the study.

CHAPTER IV

Narratives

This chapter will provide narratives of each participant's experiences navigating their military transitions. Narrative research allows for an individual's story to be shared, one that consists of everyday experiences and their perception of it (Polkinghorne, 2017). These narratives will emphasize a holistic view of participant's experiences and preserve their perspectives regarding specific events in life (Ollerenshaw & Creswell, 2002; Keats, 2009). Participant's stories have been broken into categories to organize their experiences and provide background information on each individual. These categories include their motivation in pursuing and staying in education, their experiences with military and educational transitions, as well as the three supports they described: social, military, and educational.

Jane

Background. Jane is Caucasian, 28 years old, and from Central Illinois. She currently attends school in pursuit of a master's degree in political science and public administration. Jane is married with two kids, and she joined the military in 2010, right out of high school at 18 years old. Jane shared the reason why she joined the military:

> It was strictly to pay for college. I was going to do six [years]. I was going to get in and out. About four years into it, I was offered a full-time position in the military, so now I'll put in 20 years at the military. So, I'm on my second enlistment.

Jane also started college right after high school. In total, she has obtained six degrees, some associate and some from her military experience, utilizing military benefits:

> It's free. If you don't utilize it, I think you're crazy. This will be my sixth degree that I've gotten for free from the military because your first four years are free. Then once you hit ten years of being in, you get an additional two years free. So, I have six degrees completely free of charge thanks to the military.

Jane works fulltime as a civilian and Master Sergeant in the Air Force National Guard, and she has served in the military for ten years. Her role in the armed forces is "very important to [her], right up there with being a mom."

Motivation. Jane was influenced from her home life to go to college, but she also had an internal drive to pursue a degree: "I always knew I wanted to go to college, but [my dad] said he wasn't going to pay for it. So, the only way to get it paid for was to join the military." As well as joining the military right out of college, she "started college right after high school in 2010 as well." Jane obtained "a couple associate degrees from a community college, and [she] wanted to get [her] bachelor's degree." Jane did not know what she wanted to get a bachelor's degree in at first, and her institution provided a general degree. Jane "graduated from [institution] in 2017 with [her] bachelor's in general studies. And from taking all those classes, [she] decided to go the political science route, and [her institution] had an all-online political science and public administration degree option." Jane completed her degree and graduated in December of 2020.

Transitions. Jane attended school remotely and online, and with the online school, she was able to juggle her course load and military responsibilities more easily: "I think I would have struggled before if I was going in person because then I would just

take the semester off." When asked about times she had to balance her schooling and military responsibilities, Jane replied:

> Every day. Especially working out there full-time, I work 7:30a to 5:00p, and then I come home. I have drill this weekend, so I have to arrange my schedule to where I can do my homework not on the weekend to fulfill my student role.

Jane was able to juggle her responsibilities between work and school well due to the online nature of her courses, and she had never missed a deadline for school-related assignments. In comparison, Jane had experience juggling in-person school with military responsibilities before the pandemic. When she first joined, she needed to postpone her education and take semesters off to travel and fulfill military duties. With the pandemic turning her education to online learning, she was able to take her laptop with her wherever she went. As someone working full time, she would "have to work 7:30a to 5:00p and then focus on school until late in the evening." Online school had been highly beneficial to her: she felt in control of her transitions and able to juggle school and work at the same time rather than focus on one or the other.

Support.

Social. Jane's social support system consisted of her husband, her parents, and her coworkers. Jane described how her "parents would come over and watch the kids for a while by taking them out for ice cream for a couple hours." Her husband serves as a listening ear to her anxieties and stressors and as for her coworkers, she described them as a "close-knit group, and everyone is supportive in there." Jane was one of four people in her office who were also pursuing school and working full-time, so she described how

they all "relied on each other and checked in to ensure [they] were completing homework on time and making time to study."

Military. Jane emphasized how supportive the military had been in her pursuit of education. She highlighted how she felt encouraged and pushed to pursue education while in service. To make Master Sergeant and Chief Master Sergeant, Jane described how individuals must hold at least a bachelor's degree, a form of motivation to complete post-secondary schooling. She felt the military had also supported her pursuit financially by providing military educational benefits. Jane "would not have been able to get so many degrees without free benefits from the military", and she said, "having a degree has opened a lot of doors inside and outside the military."

Educational. When Jane found herself juggling military and educational responsibilities, she did not normally notify her professors. In her experience, she would "know a few months in advance if [she] had to travel, so [she] just wouldn't sign up for classes the next semester. Then [she] wouldn't have to worry about it." Jane never felt as though the institution supported her, but she also recognized that she never reached out to any department for support that may have been provided. Jane resides two hours away from the campus and "[doesn't] even know what they offer." Instead, Jane described how supportive her professors had been, and one in particular, who she had taken several classes with, Jane had seen as a significant and supportive figure in her educational career. This professor was not notified of Jane's military status, but they had been respectful and understanding of work-school balance. Jane said this professor was "the hugest asset to [her] being able to finish college."

Laura

Background. Laura is White and 25 years old. She is currently a senior studying music and psychology and goes to school part-time while juggling military responsibilities. Laura has served in the Navy for six years, four years in the Navy Reserve, and she is currently a Petty Officer Third Class. Laura grew up in the Midwest, is currently stationed on the West Coast, and she goes to school online. Laura originally attended a state institution in Illinois and served four years as a reservist after she first enrolled in school. At this time, she auditioned to become a musician in the Navy and transitioned from reservist to active. She decided to attend her current institution after receiving advice from a former professor about attending a smaller and more personable institution. She hopes to graduate with a Bachelor of Arts in Music and Psychology in May 2021.

In high school, she was highly encouraged to consider enlisting in the military from Navy recruiters and her father who was also in the navy. However, Laura decided to take a gap year between high school and college to fully focus on applications and auditions for schools, and she told recruiters to follow up in a year. When a year passed, she decided to join the Navy reserves to help pay college tuition.

Motivation. Her decision to enroll in higher education stems from her passion for music: "I always wanted to play music professionally, and that's basically impossible to do straight out of high school. So, it was from that aspect, just a matter of being able to learn the skills to do that professionally." Military funding did not hold any significance in Laura's decision to go to college as she joined the military after she started college. Laura shared more about her passion for music and her decision to attend college:

> I took private lessons when I was in high school, and so my teacher kind of influenced my decision about where to go. Not to go, although I guess kind of that too because it's so hard to be able to do music professionally straight out of high school. Then after that, my decision to go to [my current institution] specifically was influenced by the flute professor at [my old institution] because I didn't even know that [my current institution] was a school until I went there. He was able to point me in that direction and say this is going to be a better fit for you as far as affordability, class size, and attention from professors.

Laura's drive to go to college was highly influenced by her passion for music and goal to play professionally.

Transitions. As a reservist, she was in a commissioned unit: "There was a lot of balancing difficulties with 'hey you have orders, and we just told you two days ago' and getting it done with all of my educational demands as well." After she turned active, Laura found herself travelling quite a bit for the military:

> I got pulled away a lot for different orders. There was drill, and there was one semester where I was supposed to be gone for two weeks for a military course. There was a whole bunch of crap with that because it was complicated on the military side to actually get my travel approved, and I had gone to drill that weekend where someone said, "you're going to need to be in this class a week from today." I went to my professors, and I just said "I got this notification. I'm gonna be gone next week, I'm not able to do these assignments, and I'm going to need help." I was sorting out what I could do, and I was back for literally finals week.

Laura shared that this was not the only time she had missed a week or two of school for military responsibilities. She found herself juggling her military and educational responsibilities by communicating with her professors and commanding officers in the Navy. Laura took two years off of school for active duty during her time at her current institution, and she felt "pretty burned out" from juggling the two responsibilities. She said, "it was nice to be able to take that break, but I also just wanted to get [school] done." With her current station on the West Coast and with the pandemic, she's not working in person and doesn't have much "conflict" between school and the military. Laura reflected that if she does go back to working in person at the end of her academic career, it will be "a bit more of a balancing act."

Support.

Social. Laura's social supports included her friends, parents, and military peers. She described how her "friends were always willing to hear [her] complain about whatever craziness was going on in [her] world." Laura's parents are also a large support for her through her military and educational career. Being on the West Coast, she is "very separated" from campus life, friends, and family, and she doesn't know a lot of people outside the military. With that, her support system almost entirely consists of her Navy peers who understand the stress of military life. Laura reflected on how her coworkers had helped her move to a new apartment and serve as a touchpoint when she needs to talk through difficult situations, and her peers offer support and helpful advice.

Military. Laura experienced support from the Navy in the form of financial assistance for her education and flexibility with status. When she originally auditioned to be a Navy musician, she was asked to report to active duty in October, the middle of a

fall semester. The Navy was willing to postpone Laura's status until after the semester finished, and when systematic issues pushed the date back, they were lenient and let her start active duty after the spring semester. Laura recognized that "the Navy owns [her], so if the Navy had said, 'too bad, you're going to go active duty in March', [she] wouldn't have been able to say no." Laura sees her "chain of command [as] very, very accommodating… [she has] the impression that [her] chain of command will be very supportive and helpful with" her educational and military transitions.

Laura also reflected on how the military supports her with educational benefits. When she was a reservist:

> I got the Reservist Montgomery GI Bill, which is a monthly stipend, whereas now, I thinks it's ultimately less than that stipend, it feels like more because I'm not in school full-time. I'm also receiving an additional paycheck from the military, being active duty. Essentially, if I take a three-credit class, the Navy pays $750 just straight up. Then whatever cost is beyond that is what I have to pay for. But like I said, I'm also receiving a paycheck every month from the military just for being active duty, so I feel like that has been more helpful than it was when I was a full-time student

Laura saw these benefits as "a huge financial support for [her] to be able to pursue [her] education." This along with support from her commanding officers are two ways she views the military as supportive of her educational goals.

Educational. Laura saw most of her educational support, outside of the military, stemming from her professors.

> I wouldn't say from the administrative side of the university, but definitely from all of my professors. I was able to just go up to them and say, "I'm in the military. I've got this coming up that conflicts with this class." They were always very accommodating and supportive.

Some of Laura's professors would ask for proof of orders to confirm her reason for absence from class, but she always felt they would do whatever was needed to support her. Outside of professors, Laura was aware of military student supports on campus such as "the Student Veterans Club. [She] always had classes at the time that the Veterans Club met, so that was why [she] couldn't go to that." Laura stated that she "never really felt like [she] needed anything from the Student Assistance Center, so [she] just didn't reach out." Laura was also aware of the VA representative in the Financial Aid Office, but every time she reached out "it wound up not being like [she] wanted. [She] just got referred to somebody else."

Rachel

Background. Rachel is a White woman, 38 years old, and has a husband and daughter. She served four years in the Air Force and separated from the military as a Senior Airman. Rachel joined the Air Force and decided to pursue her associate degree at the same time. During that time, Rachel was stationed in Wyoming with her family and attended an online community college. Rachel did not originally intend to join the military after high school. About four years after high school, Rachel was with a friend when they both met a recruiter, and she reflected that the recruiter made a good pitch and good reasons to enlist. Rachel's father had also served in the Army and encouraged her to join: "You should definitely go into the Air Force because it's going to give you lifelong

benefits." Rachel thought, "I don't have anything else going on. I'm not doing anything. I guess this is my next move."

Currently, Rachel is working on her second bachelor's degree and lives geographically close to the institution she attends. She has an associate degree in criminal justice which she obtained while she was active duty in the military; Rachel did so through an online college. She was also security forces in the Air Force, and her training translated to criminal justice credit through the Community College of the Air Force.

Motivation. Rachel "always wanted to go to college and always wanted to get a degree," driving factors in her pursuit of education. Both of her parents have college degrees, and she found motivation in looking up to them and "following in their footsteps." She also found leadership in the Air Force guiding her to get a degree as well. Military funding held significance in her decision because "they paid for everything. If they wouldn't have paid for it, [she] wouldn't have been able to go to school." As for what institution to attend, Rachel had "a counselor who guided [her] on what school to go to."

Transitions. While in the Air Force and simultaneously juggling school, it took Rachel almost three years to finish her associate degree. She said, "I just wanted to get it done as soon as I could, but there's restrictions because you have service. You can't just go to school all the time." Rachel felt in control of her online coursework, but "never in control of [her] military duty. You never know what the military's going to ask you to do." She described how she never had time to plan after she was given an order; it was "immediate. They call you in for a recall, you have to drop everything, and just go. There's no time." In these situations, Rachel had to put off her schoolwork and hope she

could make it up the next couple of days. Rachel described her "military schedule [as] all over the place, but online really wasn't." Rachel described one experience juggling military and school:

> I had to go somewhere for three to four days at a time, away from a computer or civilization or anything. I wasn't supposed to go one weekend, and the person who was supposed to called in. So, I basically had to take their spot. I had a paper due, so I was really stressing out. I was like, "I'm not going to get this paper done," but my teachers were very understanding. I'm the type of person that's like, "I want to get it done when it's supposed to be done. I don't want to have to ask for an extension." So, I begged and pleaded with my supervisor to go for me that weekend, but he wouldn't.

This example shows how Rachel had to "drop and go" to her military responsibilities without much warning or time to transition.

Support.

Social. While enlisted, Rachel had her daughter and husband with her while she was stationed in Wyoming. Both her and her husband worked full-time, so it was difficult to juggle her responsibilities. She said, "my husband, he worked 12-hour shifts, so there wasn't really any support at home. And the rest of my family was back in the [Midwest]. So no, I didn't really have any support, but I didn't reach out for any help either." Rachel did describe her husband as supportive, and he helped "with household stuff, taking care of the baby, and stuff so that [she] could go to school." With her coworkers, she reflected on a time:

> I did have a speech class. That was an online speech class, and you have to record yourself giving speeches. You have to record in front of at least six people. So, my flight crew, my team, would let me give the speeches in front of them. I guess that's supportive because they took time out of their day to let me do these speeches and listen to them a million times as I started over.

Other than these experiences, Rachel said she "had friends in the military, but it's kind of hard to hang out because [they] all had such different schedules. You can't really plan anything in the military." As for her family back in the Midwest, she talked to her "parents on the phone every once in a while," and they were supportive as they could be from a distance.

Military. Rachel found the military supportive through their educational benefits and through some, but not all, of her supervisors. Rachel said the military "paid for everything. If they wouldn't have paid for it, [she] wouldn't have been able to go to school." Outside of this, Rachel did not often ask for help or support from her military supervisors. The one instance she did, her supervisor would not fill in or take her shift for her. She said, "in the military, you have numerous supervisors, so I would say my other supervisors were more supportive than that. I don't think anyone went out of their way to support me, but I also didn't ask for any help." Rachel reflected on why she did not ask for help or support:

> Maybe because in that situation, that one that I did reach out for help, the supervisor wasn't very helpful. Maybe in my mind, I was just like 'Well, what's the point because everyone has a job to do. I don't want to burden them with what I have to get done.' They always tell you the mission is the most important. It's

> above all. The mission is above your family; mission is above school. Mission is above everything, so you just got to suck it up, and you got to get it done.

Educational. As far as educational supports, Rachel found her professors to be understanding of her situation. She thought "that the teachers, they were so understanding because most of their students were in the military, so they were just very understanding of" military responsibilities and late assignments. Rachel reflected that she "wouldn't have been able to go to school if they didn't offer it online." She did not utilize any campus resources for student service members and veterans as an active-duty service member, and she does not utilize any resources now that she's a veteran. Rachel explained further:

> I guess I just don't know if it's time, or I just don't know where to go or who to connect with. Sometimes I get emails about some meetups that the veteran services are doing, but you know now with COVID, obviously they're not meeting. There's maybe a missing link as to how to get involved in those services.

One resource she did find helpful was the ability to test out of courses with the College Level Examination Program (CLEP). Rache knew that her online community college "provided resources like that for service members because they know that [they] couldn't be available all the time. They let [service members] know that you can CLEP out of these classes and get the credit." Other than this service, Rachel did not know of or utilize any when pursuing her associate degree while active duty.

Summary

Chapter IV consisted of the narratives of each participant in regard to their backgrounds, their motivation to pursue and complete a post-secondary degree, their

transitions between military and educational responsibilities, and supports they have experienced when navigating these transitions. Narrative research and analysis permits the unpacking of stories by encouraging participants to expand further as to what their language and experiences mean (Riessman, 1993). Chapter V will provide an analysis of these narratives and the meaning behind their experiences with military and educational transitions.

CHAPTER V

Analysis

The purpose of this study was to examine the motivations, retention, and transitions of female student service members studying in post-secondary school while active in the military as well as any institutional support services utilized. Chapter V interprets the findings from the narratives collected from the three participants in respect to their experiences in the military, higher education, and supports in their lives. The established research questions guided this study: (a) How do military-related responsibilities influence female student service members' experience in higher education and their transition between the two environments? (b) How do military-related responsibilities affect female student service members motivation for degree completion and retention? (c) How do military-related responsibilities affect female student service members expected date of degree completion? (d) What programs and services provided by the institution have impacted female student service members retention and progress towards graduation?

Motivation

Drawing on Tinto's (2006) study of retention among higher education students, this lens can be applied to the motivation to pursue a post-secondary degree among female student service members. The three participants in this study reflected on their experiences and decisions that led them to pursue higher education as well as any external motivators.

One common theme among participants was the military's financial assistance in aiding their post-secondary schooling. Jane stated that "the only way to get it paid for was

to join the military." Rachel similarly held military funding in high regard as "they paid for everything. If they wouldn't have paid for it, [she] wouldn't have been able to go to school." In contrast, Laura's military benefits did not influence her decision to enroll in university as she "didn't join the military until after [she] had started college." However, Laura did reflect on how military benefits have helped her throughout her higher education career in terms of support.

Each service member had external and internal motivators with their decision to pursue higher education. Jane "always knew [she] wanted to go to college," and she joined both the military and enrolled in college coursework right out of high school. Comparatively, Laura took a gap year between high school and college to focus on her applications for school. Her motivation lay in her passion for music and wanting "to play music professionally, and that's basically impossible straight out of high school. So, it was from that aspect, just a matter of being able to learn the skills to do that professionally." Rachel also did not pursue a degree upon graduation from high school. It was not until about four years after when Rachel went with her friend to meet an Air Force recruiter thinking, "well, I'm not going anywhere… I'm not doing anything." After joining the Air Force, Rachel wasn't "allowed to start going to school until [she was] a year and a half into [her] service." As for wanting to go to college, like Jane, Rachel "always wanted to go to college… always wanted to get a degree." Internal motivations were what drew the participants to school and helped motivate their retention in coursework.

All three experienced external motivators to obtain a post-secondary degree as well. Jane's parents encouraged her to get a degree, but her "dad said he wasn't going to

pay for it." This is where military funding held significance for Jane. Eventually, military responsibilities influenced Jane as well:

> It didn't at first, but the rules of the rank structure has changed since I've been in. So, if you want to make rank, like senior Master Sergeant or Chief Master Sergeant, you have to have a bachelor's degree. You can be the best and the best in your career field, and if you're standing next to someone with a bachelor's degree, they're going to choose them every day.

Rachel also experienced motivation to pursue a degree from the military. She said, "it was very much talked up like I think the leadership in the Air Force was like, 'this is something that you should do,' so our leadership guided us in that direction." In contrast, Laura did not experience motivation for school through the military, but she joined the military to support her schooling. As someone who wanted to play music professionally, Laura auditioned in the Navy to be a musician. However, Laura did take "private lessons when [she] was in high school, so [her] teacher influenced [her] decision about where to go" for college schooling. Laura also had a flute professor at her original institution help her transfer to her current: "he was able to point me in that direction and say, 'this is going to be a better fit for you as far as affordability, class size, and attention. He was so honest." These external motivators have supplemented participants internal motivations to pursue higher education.

Internal motivations are what drove these female student service members to pursue a higher education degree, and varying degrees of external motivators from the military and family helped push them to finish their degree. Both Jane and Laura experienced external pushes from commanding officers and military rank structure to

continue to educate themselves and get post-secondary degrees. In contrast, Laura did not experience external motivators from the military, but she did from a college professor and mentor. The participants did not indicate any difficulties which led them to question their pursuit of a degree nor dropout from college. These servicemembers experienced difficulty navigating their transitions between educational and military responsibilities, but they showed no indication of not completing their degree.

Transitions

Schlossberg (2011) listed four aspects of coping with transitions: situation, self, support, and strategies. Utilizing these pillars is key to understanding all facets of these female student service member's transitions between higher education and military responsibilities. It should be noted that all three participants attended school online and remotely, so there was minimal physical transition between work and school environments.

Situation. Schlossberg (2011) referred to situations as external factors that may influence transitions and magnify stress, including family relationships and various hardships. All three women are juggling multiple facets of life along with their military responsibilities. Both Jane and Rachel are married with children while Laura's marital status is single.

Jane has two children, and as well as being a service member, Jane also "works as a civilian fulltime in the Air National Guard." Jane went to school virtually, and lives in her hometown with her family. Jane has the benefit of living with family, but this can sometimes be another stressor when managing both work in the military and pursuing a master's degree. Two young children can be a handful to juggle, but she had her husband

and family close by to rely on for help. As far as her military responsibilities, Jane "really [hasn't] had too much difficulty because [she] can pretty much take [her] laptop anywhere. [She's] done schoolwork in Texas, Louisiana, Mississippi. Wherever [she's] at, the laptop goes." Before she started with online coursework however, she "would have to take certain semesters off, so [she] could go travel and fulfill those duties." Jane's experience with online coursework has helped her manage her responsibilities with both school and military better than when she attended school in person.

In comparison, Rachel's daughter was born while she was going to school for her associate degree and was stationed in Wyoming, far from her hometown, serving in the Air Force. Rachel lived with her husband and daughter on base while attending school online. Rachel had several situational factors during her service: she had a newborn at home, was transitioning to a new part of the country, and she was far from her family. While she had her husband with her, "he worked 12-hour shifts." Rachel had many factors that impacted her transition not only between the military and educational environments, but also her transition to Wyoming. As far as her military situation, Rachel never had time to plan her life around her military responsibilities: "never. It's immediate. If they call you in for a recall, you have to drop everything and just go. There is no time." Rachel described how she felt in control of her online coursework, "but never in control of [her] military duty. You never know what the military is going to ask you to do." Rachel's military responsibilities and the extremely short notice she received did not make for a conductive learning environment, even with the online format of her classes.

While Laura's marital status is single, she is currently stationed on the West Coast as a Navy musician, very far from her hometown and school in the Midwest. Previously,

she was stationed in the Midwest and in the same state as the institutions she attended. When Laura first started school and joined the military, she lived on campus, but she currently is finishing her degree online. Laura served four years as a Navy reservist, and "during that time, [she] went to [Institution 1] for a little bit and then transferred to [Institution 2]." Not only has Laura navigated transitions between military and educational responsibilities, but she also transferred institutions and moved across the country for her service.

When Laura went to school in-person while managing her military responsibilities, she "got pulled away a lot for different orders. There was drill. There was one semester where [she] was supposed to be gone for two weeks for a military class… [she] was also out of class a lot trying to coordinate with the Navy." Not only did Laura have these shorter conflicts between school and the military, but she also took two years off duty: "I took two years off to go out on duty. It was good because by the time I left [Institution 1], I was pretty burned out, so it was nice to be able to take that break. But I also just wanted to get [my education] done." Laura's situation with her military responsibilities has delayed her degree completion date and has led her to balance military and education responsibilities even longer.

These situations that Jane, Laura, and Rachel experienced while managing their military and educational transitions showcases the depth and layering of the military and life. The three did not speak specifically to how family and home life impacted their transitions, but they did speak to how it influenced their social support systems. As far as their situations coordinating their military and educational responsibilities, in-person schooling seems to have made it more difficult to juggle the two with Jane and Laura's

experiences, but Rachel also had difficulty managing both even when she was taking courses online. Rachel's situation might have been unique among the three as she was active duty in the Air Force pre COVID-19 and had more in-person commitments through the military. It is important to note that Rachel's coursework predates COVID-19 while Laura and Jane attend school and balance military responsibilities during the pandemic. COVID-19 has limited many in-person activities for school and work, hence why both Laura and Jane virtually attended classes. These limitations may have made transitions between education and military easier for Laura and Rachel.

Self. According to Schlossberg (2011), self signifies one's personal endurance for coping with transitions and situations, and one's character and attitude play integral roles in this coping technique. A commonality among Jane, Laura, and Rachel is that all viewed their transitions as something they had to get done and work through, not so much as a barrier to complete their education. Jane said she had "never missed a deadline or anything like that" which shows personal strength and resiliency navigating her transitions and situations.

Rachel reflected on how the military mindset influenced her transitions and how the military "always tell[s] you the mission is the most important. It's above all. The mission is above your family, mission is above school, mission is above everything. You just have to suck it up, and you have got to get it done." This military mindset negates the self and other responsibilities. Instead of providing Rachel a sense of self, this mindset focuses on the common goal of the military: complete the mission. It seems as though this did allow Rachel to develop personal endurance in her transitions by focusing on the goal in regard to her education and the mission in the military.

Similar to Rachel's experience, Laura also expressed the loss of her sense of self in various ways. She says Navy musicians are "the face of the Navy because [they are] the people that are going out, doing public affairs gigs, and engaging with the public about what the Navy is. Also, how [they are] relevant to the United States and what [their] mission is." This experience forces her to not only represent but embody the Navy. Laura recognized her place in the military: she had to follow the orders she's given with no questions asked. She was a not a rational person but an object to be commanded. Again, the military negates the sense of self, but by managing her transitions between education and the military, Laura has demonstrated a strong resiliency and personal stamina.

All three, Laura, Rachel, and Jane, demonstrated resiliency and strength in character to navigate their higher education and military transitions. While the military emphasizes the "mission above all," these three were able to develop a strong sense of self to navigate their transitions.

Support. The support aspect of Schlossberg's (2011) theory includes relationships, reliance, and trust with others. There were three categories of support that Laura, Rachel, and Jane described: social, military, and educational supports.

Social. Jane's social support system consisted of her husband, her parents, and her coworkers. Her parents would take her kids out and watch them for a couple hours, so she was able to focus on coursework. She also described her office as a "really close-knit group, and everyone is supportive in there." These social supports have helped Jane manage other life responsibilities outside of work and school as well as give her an outlet for her experiences. Jane was one of a group of people who were going to school at the

same time "so [we] all rely on each other and check in to make sure [we are] still moving forward" with their degrees. Jane received additional support in her home life and with her transitions between higher education and military responsibilities.

Being on the West Coast, Laura described "most of [her] social support [are] people that [she] works with and then [her] parents and friends from back home that [she] can text and talk with." These connections were important because she didn't "really know a whole lot of people out [there] outside the Navy." She values "having people there to help [her] move and also to talk to and be like 'oh my gosh I'm so stressed.'" Her support network of coworkers out on the West Coast has helped her transition with the move but also with school and military transitions.

In contrast, Rachel said she "didn't really have any support." Rachel had just moved to her new station in Wyoming, had a daughter, and she and her husband were both balancing full-time jobs. Her "husband worked 12-hour shifts, so there wasn't really any support at home" while the rest of her family lived in the Midwest where she grew up. Rachel acknowledged that she "didn't reach out for help either… [she] didn't want to burden them with what [she] had to get done, so maybe that's one of the reasons [why she] never asked for any help." Rachel attended school, was on active duty in the Air Force, and raised her newborn daughter with minimal supports. She felt that she did not receive any real social support in her home life or navigating educational and military transitions.

While Laura, Rachel, and Jane all had different levels of supports, all were able to navigate their military and higher education transitions. Rachel had little to no social support, and she was still able to complete her associate degree online. Since there are

only three participants in this research, the impact of social support on transitions is difficult to generalize among the female student service member population.

Military. All three participants received financial support from the military to fund their education. Jane reflected that she "would not have been able to get so many degrees without free benefits from the military" and "having a degree has opened a lot of doors inside and outside the military." Laura expressed how the benefits were "a huge financial support for [her] to be able to pursue [her] education." Similarly, Rachel shared that the military "paid for everything. If they wouldn't have paid for it, [she] wouldn't have been able to go to school." Military educational benefits have been a financial support for these women in their pursuit of education, degrees they might not have been able to obtain otherwise. Higher education students experience a significant amount of stress when financing their education, but student service member's access to military educational benefits relieves that financial stress (Gonzalez et al., 2015). These female student service members did not experience that financial stress since they utilized military educational benefits as a source of support for their educational pursuits. All three women also noted a general sense of support from the military to pursue their higher education. Jane described how post-secondary degrees are required to make higher officer ranks within the Air Force and the encouragement she received from commanding officers. When Laura first auditioned to be a Navy musician, they pushed back the date she was to start active duty to coincide with the end of her educational semester.

Comparatively, Rachel felt support for her educational pursuits from some of her commanding officers, but not all. In one instance when she had a paper due the same weekend, she was ordered to fill a peer's shift, her commanding officer would not

transfer her orders or take her shift. After that instance, she shared she did not feel comfortable reaching out to supervisors in search of support. Rachel had the mindset that she had a job to do and had to handle it alone, and she said, "I don't want to burden them with what I have to get done.'" Rachel reflected that she did not often, if ever, ask for support after that occurrence with her unsupportive commanding officer, as the military's motto is "the mission is the most important. It's above all. The mission is above your family; mission is above school. Mission is above everything." This military motto does not support external factors and indulgences in life including education and family, one way Rachel reflected how the military was unsupportive of her pursuit of a higher education degree.

Educational. As far as support from educational sources, each female student service member had a different experience. Jane typically would have advance notice of travel expectations and so she "just wouldn't sign up for classes the next semester" or if she did, she would notify her professors. Jane did not normally have to notify her professors of any military conflicts she experienced with her education, but she did reflect on how one professor had been a significant, supportive figure in her educational career. This professor was "the hugest asset to [her] being able to finish college" because she understood and was respectful of work-school balance.

Comparatively, Laura would notify her professors of her military status: "I was able to just go up and say, 'I'm in the military. I've got this coming up that conflicts with this class.' They were always very accommodating and supportive." And while some professors would ask for additional documentation of the conflicts, she felt that they would do what was needed to support her transitions. Similarly, Rachel's professors were

"so understanding because most of their students were in the military." These three female student service members all emphasized that their professors were an integral aspect of their support system when it came to pursuing and completing their degree but also with navigating their military-educational transitions.

Outside of professors, none of the participants utilized any campus support services in place for student service members and veterans. Laura was aware of support services but never pursued them because she did feel she needed anything that was offered. While some of the services conflicted with classes, others just did not interest her. She was clear that she knew they were there, but she just never sought them out.

Jane and Rachel were both unaware of any of support services specifically for student veterans and service members. Jane said, "I don't even know what they offer." Rachel explained further that "there's maybe a missing link as to how to get involved in those services." All of the participants experienced a disconnect or a lack of knowledge about the military-specific support services on campus and in the community and the support that they provide to students. It is also important to note that these service members all lived off-campus and attended classes online, so as a result they were already experiencing a physical disassociation from the campus environment. Two of these service members were not only juggling work and education but also family commitments and responsibilities as well. Rachel even reflected that she "didn't know if it's time" when she reflected on why she wasn't involved in resources for military-connected students.

Strategies. During transitions, students learn to alter, gain new perspective, and reduce stress by way of gaining new strategies to manage their transitions (Schlossberg,

2011). Due to the nature of their online courses, all three participants reported easier transitions compared to on-campus learning. Jane talked about managing her schedule for schoolwork around her work and her weekend drill schedule, so she focused more time in the evenings for classes. Due to the online nature of her school, she was able to plan when she would complete assignments for her classes around her military responsibilities, and she never missed a deadline. Compared to when Jane attended classes in-person before the pandemic, she had to take semesters off of school to travel for her military responsibilities. With the shift online, she was able to continue working on classes even when traveling out of state. "I can pretty much take my laptop anywhere."

Laura also has experience navigating her military and educational responsibilities when she had in-person classes and now her classes are online. Laura's military orders are more immediate. To balance her responsibilities, Laura would communicate with her commanding officers and with her professors. There was one instance where Laura had to take two years off of school for active-duty military responsibilities. Now that there is a pandemic, it is easier for Laura to complete her courses: "I think if I'm still in school when we get back to work, that's going to be a little bit more of a balancing act. Right now, I don't think it's too much of a challenge."

Rachel only had experience juggling online coursework with her military experiences. Sometimes, she had to travel for several days at a time, away from resources or any easy access to her classwork. She did not have time to manage her transitions as "you never know what the military's going to ask you to do." Rachel's strategies

consisted of completing her coursework early, and if she had to immediately "drop and go" for her military responsibilities, she made up her work after she returned.

The strategies these women used were varied as their military statuses were different. Both Laura and Rachel have experience juggling coursework as active-duty members of the military, and as a National Guard-member, Jane had more notice for her military responsibilities. This is important to note when considering how student service members juggle their military and higher education responsibilities. A key point was navigating these transitions by having open communication with their professors, especially if assignments were going to be completed and turned in late. All three established connections with their professors, and while Jane did not inform her professors of her military status, she did communicate her unique needs which were supported. All of the professors were very understanding and accommodating when these female student service members communicated their individual needs to meet the course expectations.

Summary

Chapter V contained an analysis and reflection of elements participants shared during the interview process. The four initial research questions that guided this study were investigated through the lens of participants' experiences, and there were also unexpected findings highlighted. This analysis compared and contrasted participants' experiences and responses to interview questions. In Chapter VI, discussion of implications of the findings of this study will be provided as well as recommendations for student affairs professionals, faculty, and students who interact with the female student service member population.

Chapter VI

Discussion

This chapter highlights how the findings of this research are relevant to previously conducted research and how previous research ties into this study. The experiences of female student service members relate to preexisting literature, and this chapter aims to delineate these connections. Four research questions have been asked in Chapter I of this study, and Chapter VI will discuss the meaning of the findings to these questions. The research questions were: 1) How do military-related responsibilities influence female student service members' experience in higher education and their transitions between the two environments? 2) How do military-related responsibilities affect female student service members motivation for degree completion and retention? 3) How do military-related responsibilities affect female student service members' expected date of degree completion? 4) What programs and services provided by the institution have impacted female student service members' retention and progress towards graduation? Finally, suggestions for future research will be expressed as well as implications of this study.

Discussion

This discussion addresses the research questions by considering previous research, responses from participant interviews, and conclusions drawn from the research conducted. The research questions are broken down into themes that arose from the interviews, providing in-depth analysis into each research question. During the participant interviews, major themes developed, some anticipated and some unanticipated, when searching to understand female student service member's experiences when transitioning between military and higher education responsibilities.

Unanticipated themes included social, military, and educational supports in their transitions navigating military and educational responsibilities. The female student service members interviewed had diverse experiences in their pursuit of higher education, military responsibilities, and personal lives. Various aspects of their life resulted in a struggle to manage multiple transitions, but each had internal and external motivations to complete their degree.

Female student service members' transitions between military and educational responsibilities. Many student service members report stress when transitioning between the structured, hierarchical environment the military provides and the autonomous, self-directed experience of higher education (Pellegrino & Hoggan, 2015). The women in this study expressed their struggles to navigate between the responsibilities and expectations provided by the military and through their higher education coursework. These service members received short notice when given orders by commanding officers for military responsibilities that took them away from means to complete their educational responsibilities as active-duty members of the military, but those in the National Guard typically had orders months in advance. Before COVID-19, educational responsibilities were managed by relaying conflicts to their professors and completing assignments late. On the other hand, female student service members in the National Guard were given enough notice so they have the option of taking semesters off of schooling if there is a conflict with their upcoming military orders. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the limitation of in-person work, and the switch to online learning, female student service members who were National Guard and active duty were able to navigate their transitions much more easily.

Social support. A significant number of student service members in higher education environments with social supports report an increase in coping strategies and decrease in mental health symptoms (Romero, et al., 2015). The three female student service members in this study reported varying levels of social support. Female student service members who have familial support and the support of a partner experienced less stress when managing their military and educational responsibilities. Students service members who are stationed away from family may have had virtual support, but there was not that immediate and in-person support provided to counter outsource stressors. Some female student service members are able to maintain connections with friends long-distance and identify individuals they trusted when help was needed. In contrast, some student service members lack a sense of social support when navigating their transitions and responsibilities, especially when they are stationed away from friends and family. Despite this lack of social support, female student service members are able to complete their education while managing active duty orders. Social support is not necessary to navigate military and educational responsibilities, but it does reduce stress and makes it easier to manage responsibilities.

Military support. The Post-9/11 G.I. Bill has been used by over one million military-connected students in their pursuit of higher education since 2014 (Gonzalez, et al., 2015). The women in this study expressed that they used military educational benefits to pay for their post-secondary schooling, and all said they would not have been able to afford college without these benefits. Female student service members felt overall support from the military and their commanding officers in their pursuits of higher education. One particularly strong form of encouragement towards education is how a

degree is required to make certain officer ranks, promoting education within the military's structure.

On the other hand, some female student service members can experience commanding officers who are not as supportive of their educational efforts, and as a result they may feel like they cannot ask for support from other commanding officers who would be supportive. Female student service members do receive support from peers in their unit when navigating military, educational, and life responsibilities and transitions. Participants in this study reported examples of support including peers helping with their class assignments, assistance moving to a new place of residence, and other student service members checking in on each other to ensure they are all completing the necessary coursework.

The military support these female service members experienced were engrained in the educational benefits the military provides to service members and veterans as well as the support they received from their military units. Their experiences with support from their units and commanding officers were varied. It is clear that military educational benefits were a significant factor in their ability to pursue a higher education degree, and the support they received from peers helped these women manage their overlapping responsibilities. The support of commanding officers plays a significant role in the ability of female student service members success when navigating their military and educational transitions, but it is not determinative of their success.

Educational support. Student service members form a unique population on campus, bring transferable educational experiences and financial benefits, and require consideration when addressing their needs (Brown & Gross, 2011). All three female

student service members who participated in this study experienced support from their professors when navigating their military and educational transitions. Female student service members are successful in the academic pursuits due to the support and empathy from their professors and other faculty on campus. Whether or not student service members disclosed their commitments and transitions to their professors, faculty's willingness to support students was critical to their success. Professors who are supportive and understanding of female student service member's transitions and work life gave them extensions for their assignments which helped them be successful in school.

Female student service member's motivation for degree completion and retention. Molina and Morse (2017) reported that a key factor in service members' and veterans' decision to enlist in the military is due to the educational benefits the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs provides to military-connected students. All of the participants in this research study described having a high motivation to initially pursue a degree in higher education.

These motivations included internal motivations to pursue higher education such as always wanting to have a bachelor's and post-secondary degree and looking up to others, like their parents, who had post-secondary degrees. They were also motivated externally through the support and encouragement from their parents as well as by the military to pursue higher education. The military provided not just support by offering military educational benefits, but a push to pursue higher education by making a bachelor's degree as a requirement to increase rank and obtain positions within the Air Force and Navy.

Outside of their initial motivations to pursue a post-secondary degree, none of the participants shared any real sense of struggle to stay in school and complete their degree besides having to take a semester or more off of school due to military duty. Instead of a struggle or barrier, they saw their coursework more as a means to an end and simply another responsibility to manage. This perspective inadvertently speaks to their high retention in higher education, and even if they transfer institutions, they continue to complete their degree. These female student service members motivations were embedded in their goal to complete a higher education degree, and military conflicts seem to have delayed their degree completion but not have any effect on their motivation.

Female student service members' expected date of degree completion. The largest study on military-connected students in 2014 found that it took student service members longer than the average student to complete their post-secondary degree (Borsari et al., 2017). And all of the student service members in this study reported that it took them longer to complete their degrees than the average student. Pursuing their undergraduate and graduate degrees took longer than the average two or four years it takes students to obtain their degree due to military responsibilities conflicting with school. These service members reported having to take semesters off of school to fulfill active duty orders or only attend school part-time to manage their transitions. The impact of the military on the time it takes for student service members to complete their education is clear: it takes student service members longer than the average student to complete their post-secondary degree.

Pursuing educational degrees while active duty or non-active duty depends on whether their schooling is online and the nature of the orders they are given from the

military. In all cases, it is their active duty orders that were mostly responsible for drawing them away from school and coursework and initiated their transitions between military and educational environments. During COVID-19, coursework was moved to online and remote learning, allowing them to more easily manage educational and military transitions. Overall, military responsibilities generally have an impact on the date of degree completion by prolonging it as shown by the female student service members in this study.

Female student service members' usage of institutional services. Schiavone and Gentry (2014) state that out of 690 institutions analyzed, 62% reported that they provide services and programs specifically for student service members and veterans. One noticeable report from all of the service members in this study was their lack of knowledge about, and use of, services specifically for student service members and veterans at their higher education institution. They all shared that they did not know how to get involved or did not see the benefit of taking the time to connect with services. Being knowledgeable about resources but choosing not to get involved in campus services specifically tailored for student service members and veterans is due to the students not recognizing the additional support and community these services offer. They also reported a lack of connection and knowledge of how to reach out and participate in events and organizations offered by institutional support services. Female student service members experience a disconnect and lack of outreach from services for veterans and student service members. This lack of outreach and communication to the military-connected students' community is concerning. Although this study only had three participants, the lack of communication they expressed when it came to resources the

university provides represents part of the female student service member experience in higher education.

Implications for Higher Education

For higher education institutions to be successful, they must consider every facet of the student population, and their specific needs. This is especially important for this population as the number of female student service members and veterans on campus continues to increase (Schiavone & Gentry, 2014). While this population on college campuses may be small, they are an often-overlooked population that should be given recognition and consideration. To fully support this population of students, it is important to understand and provide for their unique experiences and needs. This study analyzed the experiences of female student service members through their transitions between military and educational environments, their motivation for a post-secondary degree, the effect their transitions have on their date of degree completion, and the institutional services they utilized.

In navigating their transitions, these female student service members were responsible and communicative in managing their responsibilities. As older than the traditional student and molded to the strict regime and structure of the military, these students communicated their needs with professors in a mature manner that is rare in young undergraduate students. These female student service members have shown that they can advocate for themselves and their needs, but the support that existed was utilized at an institutional level for the participants in this study.

Navigating recurring transitions is not only stressful for student service members, but also unnecessarily difficult without good knowledge of the available support from the

institution and its services. It is important for faculty and staff to understand the experiences of female student service members to be able to support them through their transitions. This may include specialized training and educational programs for staff and faculty highlighting the specific needs and experiences of student service members and veterans, including a segment specifically geared toward female student service members and veterans. Academic advising services, financial aid, and bursar departments should be prepared to recognize the transitions student service members make and the absences from school commonly found in this population of students to help them understand and navigate their transitions on the educational side.

The female student service members in this study reported an initial motivation for degree completion, but they did not appear to need additional motivation while navigating military and educational transitions, simply the needed flexibility and understanding from faculty about their unique responsibilities. It is important for student affairs professionals to understand the primary motivations of this population of student service members in order to help them maintain this motivation and aid their retention in higher education.

As far as student service members and their expected date of degree completion, the female student service members in this study have shown that it takes them longer than the average two years for associate and four years for bachelor's to complete their degree. Higher education institutions and student affairs professionals should be prepared to provide specialized advising and programming to student service members to understand their motivations to stay in school while managing their military responsibilities as well as to promote retention. This may be advisors within a department

who are specially trained and knowledgeable about the female student service member and veteran population and the challenges and transitions they experience. These advisors would be trained to meet female student service members' distinctive needs and to understand and cultivate their motivations and retention.

Finally, this study focused on the services female student service member knew about and utilized on campus. One of the services frequently mentioned as being used by the participants was the financial aid office, specifically for navigating the use of their military educational benefits to pay for their college pursuits. But otherwise, female student service members do not appear to engage in other available support services specifically tailored for them such as Military Student Assistance Centers. Student affairs professionals must be clear in their communication and efforts to engage student populations, an integral aspect to students' retention and satisfaction at post-secondary institutions. Female student service members are no different, so it is important to clearly communicate avenues for involvement, resources available, and support networks for female student service members.

All three participants in this study attended school remotely and online over the last year, an important aspect to note in their transitions. While this was not originally intended or how they began their educational journey, the COVID-19 pandemic forced higher education institutions to provide new methods of learning to a larger portion of students than previously considered. This online mode of learning made their military and educational transitions much easier to navigate and manage, especially when military orders drew them away from campus. Higher education institutions should consider how to provide similar alternative methods of learning when moving forward to assist the

student service member population that are required to make geographical transitions as part of their military status and call to active duty.

The women in this study shared that their roles in the military were extremely important to them as well as their status as student service members. To support and give credit to this population of students' distinctive and valid experiences, student affairs professionals and faculty must be knowledgeable about these experiences and the needs this population requires to complete their degree and support their military and educational transitions.

Further Research

This was a small, qualitative study with three participants, so it does not propose to represent all female student service members' experiences with navigating their military and educational transitions. Research is lacking in the realm of the experiences of female student service members and veterans in higher education, and more recognition and attention should be provided to these students. The three participants of this study were limited to the Navy, Air Force, and Air Force National Guard, and only one of the three experienced a change to a different institution while they were managing their military and higher education transitions. There are several potentially worthwhile avenues and opportunities to further research and better understand this critical population of students.

The participants in this study were all White, and while this was not intentional, it does need to be recognized. Future research could comprise the same intentions and research questions as this study but focus more on the experiences of non-White and a more diverse pool of female student service members. Minority populations face more

discrimination, oppression, and targeted racism in the United States compared to White individuals, so this may provide further information on the impact transitions female student service members deal with that this study did not delineate.

While this study had two participants at the same institution and one at a different one, future research could focus on the experiences of female student service members at various institutions across the United States. Evaluating the experiences at different types of institutions and in different parts of the country would provide a more in depth look at the experiences of these students.

This research study focused on the experiences of female student service members' and their transitions between higher education and military responsibilities. The study did not however evaluate or look at the resources and support networks that a singular or even multiple institutions provide to these students. Future research could be conducted at a higher education institution with a larger population of female student service members and specifically focus on their experience in utilizing campus resources.

All three of the female student service members in this study attended school remotely and online, so a future research study could focus on female student service members who attend school in-person and their experiences managing their military and educational transitions. This could pose an interesting and unique perspective especially when considering the structured nature of the military and the self-directed and open nature of college. An example of a future research qualitative study would be to explore the experiences of female student service members who live in on-campus housing and transition between military and a more traditional post-secondary education environments and responsibilities.

Conclusion

Female student service members are a unique population in higher education with distinct needs and experiences that require further understanding and research to be able to provide adequate support to this population. This research study has focused on this population of students and uncovered the unique experiences they face. Female student service members value both their educational experience as well as their military duty creating distinctive involvement in higher education. This study will impact the work of student affairs professionals because it provides insight into an often-overlooked and disregarded population of students that requires support and resources in order to navigate their transitions and have a sense of belonging at their institution.

These student service members did not utilize the resources on campus that are specifically provided for them, an aspect that is important to recognize and understand the meaning behind. Student affairs professionals need to identify the disconnect that was found by this study in order to improve connections with these students and the services provided to them. Instead of assuming student service members and veterans are the same population, with the all the same experiences and needs, it is integral for student affairs professionals to learn more about the subpopulations of military-connected students, their involvements, and support each of these subpopulation's unique needs to truly succeed in and outside of higher education environments. This population of students give service and sacrifice to the U.S., knowledge that higher educational professionals must recognize, respect, and pay forward when interacting with student service members and veterans.

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Appendix A

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

Female Student Service Member's Higher Education and Military Transitions

You are invited to participate in a research study conducted by Sophie Cieslicki under the direction of Dr. Jon Coleman from the Department of Counseling and Higher Education at Eastern Illinois University.
Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. Please ask questions about anything you do not understand, before deciding whether or not to participate.

***OPTIONAL*:** You have been asked to participate in this study because you are a female student service member who has completed at least one semester of school.

- **PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

The purpose of this study is to investigate how female student service members transition between military-related responsibilities and their responsibilities as students in higher education institutions. In addition, this study seeks to investigate the how this population experiences degree progress and retention as well as what campus resources student service members utilize.

- **PROCEDURES**

If you volunteer to participate in this study, you will be asked to:

- Complete this consent form. Please thoroughly read this document and sign at the bottom of the form.
- Complete a demographics questionnaire, referred to as the demographics sheet. This includes questions regarding your gender, age, ethnicity, student status, etc.
- Schedule an interview time within a week of completing the demographics sheet.
- Confirm the interview within 24 hours of the assigned time. You will receive a copy of the interview questions at this time.

Following, the interview will be completed. This interview will be conducted either through an electronic video conference or phone call.

After the conclusion of the interview, you will receive the transcript and be asked to review and check the transcript for accuracy.

The interview should take about an hour to complete. You may be contacted with some follow up questions after the completion of the interview if necessary. Due to the phone

or video conference nature of the interview, you will be asked to find a quiet and private location to complete the interview.

With your permission, the interview will be audio recorded. By using a voice recorder on my phone and a separate voice recorder as a backup, this will ensure the interview is properly recorded in case of one device malfunctioning.

- **POTENTIAL RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS**

During the interview, some questions may cause discomfort and may bring up memories and experiences you may wish to forget. If this is the case, you do not need to answer the question, and we will move on to a different question if you are uncomfortable. As this is an interview, there is risk of being overheard by others. If this is the case, the interview will be postponed until you are able to find a location that is more secure and comfortable.

This study may be terminated if I leave Eastern Illinois University or die. If either of these happen, the study will cease to exist, and your confidentiality will remain intact. Necessary precautions will be taken to maintain your confidentiality.

There is no compensation or treatment provided to you if you experience physical or psychological harm during this process.

- **POTENTIAL BENEFITS TO SUBJECTS AND/OR TO SOCIETY**

Potential benefits of participation include being able to tell your story as well as potentially supporting other female student service members in balancing their military and educational responsibilities.

Potential benefits to society include increased knowledge of female student service member's experience when transitioning between military and educational settings and increased knowledge of the needs associated with this population. An underrepresented population will be highlighted and how female student service members experiences differ from their male counterparts will also be demonstrated.

- **CONFIDENTIALITY**

Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law. Confidentiality will be maintained by means of assigning a code name to each participant. The information collected through the demographics sheet will be kept separate from the interview recordings and transcriptions. The data will be kept in a different locked safe or password protected locations. The data will be deleted three years

after the completion of this study, and the principal researcher will be the only person with access to collected data. The subject's information collected as part of the research, even with identifiers removed, will not be used or distributed for future research.

- **PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL**

Participation in this research study is voluntary and not a requirement or a condition for being the recipient of benefits or services from Eastern Illinois University or any other organization sponsoring the research project. If you volunteer to be in this study, you may withdraw at any time without consequences of any kind or loss of benefits or services to which you are otherwise entitled.
There is no penalty if you withdraw from the study and you will not lose any benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

- **IDENTIFICATION OF INVESTIGATORS**

If you have any questions or concerns about this research, please contact:
Sophie Cieslicki, Principal Investigator, (608) 799-3537, sncieslicki@eiu.edu
Dr. Jon Coleman, Faculty Sponsor, jkcoleman@eiu.edu

- **RIGHTS OF RESEARCH SUBJECTS**

If you have any questions or concerns about the treatment of human participants in this study, you may call or write:

Institutional Review Board
Eastern Illinois University
600 Lincoln Ave.
Charleston, IL 61920
Telephone: (217) 581-8576
E-mail: eiuirb@www.eiu.edu

You will be given the opportunity to discuss any questions about your rights as a research subject with a member of the IRB. The IRB is an independent committee composed of members of the University community, as well as lay members of the community not connected with EIU. The IRB has reviewed and approved this study.

I voluntarily agree to participate in this study. I understand that I am free to withdraw my consent and discontinue my participation at any time. I have been given a copy of this form.

Appendix B

Semi-Structured Interview Questions/Protocol

Thank the participant. Make sure the participant is comfortable, review the informed consent document, and discuss any preliminary questions they may have.

Introductory Question

1. Do I have your permission to record this interview?

Background Questions

1. To begin, can you tell me a little about yourself
    a. Where is home?
2. Do you currently live in on campus housing?
    a. If not, where do you live?
    b. Do you live with any family or relatives?
3. When is your anticipated graduation date?

Questions Regarding Military and Educational Experience

1. What influenced your decision to go to college?
    a. Did military funding hold any significance?
    b. Who influenced your decision and how?
    c. How did you determine what institution to attend?
2. Can you tell me about your decision to enlist in the military?
3. Can you tell me about your decision to pursue higher education while in service?
4. How have your military responsibilities impacted your decision to pursue a college degree?

5. Some members of the service branches report struggling to balance military-related responsibilities with education or coursework. Have you experienced this?
    a. If yes, how so? Please provide an example or a time.
        i. What and who supported you?
        ii. Did you notify any of your professors?
    b. If no, how do you think you have avoided this?
6. Can you describe a time when you had to balance your pursuit of higher education and military-related responsibilities?
    a. Did you face any conflicts in school or the military?
    b. How is your role as a college student? As a service member?
7. Have you been called for deployment or gone on active duty during when you were enrolled in college coursework?
    a. If so, please provide and describe a specific experience.
    b. If so, did you feel as though you were in control of your transition?
    c. How did the institution support you if they did and if they didn't, what was the issue as you understood it?
8. Can you describe your social support system that you currently have as a female student service member?
    a. Who does it include?
    b. How does this system support you?
    c. Have you connected to other service members on the campus?
        i. If so, can you describe what you went through to do so?
        ii. If not, why did you choose not to do so?

9. What campus resources have you utilized, and what resources have supported you?
    a. How did these resources help you?
    b. What resources would you recommend to other student service members? Would you not recommend any and why?

Closing Question

1. Are there any other experiences related to your life, military status, and pursuit of education that have not been discussed and you would like to provide?

Thank you for your time and participating in this study.

Appendix C

Email to Potential Participants

Dear Student Service Member Community,

My name is Sophie Cieslicki, and I am conducting research on current female student service members who understand the transition between military and educational settings. With this study, I aim to provide a space for female student service members to share their voice and experience. Participants of this research will potentially impact student affair professionals' in their interactions and support with student service members in collegiate environments. I am a graduate student pursuing a master's degree in College Student Affairs at Eastern Illinois University, and this research topic is the subject of my thesis under the direction of Dr. Coleman. If you have completed at least one semester of schooling and are currently a National Guard member, Veteran, or Reservist, you are invited to participate in this research. You will be asked to partake in an interview that would be about an hour. If you are interested in participating in this research project, please contact me via email at sncieslicki@eiu.edu.

Thank you,

Sophie Cieslicki

sncieslicki@eiu.edu

Appendix D

Demographics Sheet

1. What is your gender?
    a.
2. What is your age?
    a.
3. What best describes your ethnicity?
    a.
4. What year in school are you currently?
    a.
5. Are you a full-time or part-time student?
    a.
6. What is your major?
    a.
7. What branch of the military do you serve in?
    a.
8. How long have you served in the military?
    a.
9. What is your military rank?
    a.